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6 September 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Probable Communist Reactions to Use of the
OXCART for Reconnaissance over Cuba

Assumptions: (a) Four flights: two per month for two months
(b) The vehicle would be detected and identified

We think it most likely that there would be no attempt to shoot down the aircraft, and that the Communists would either make no public issue of the matter, or would keep public controversy in a very low key. If they did make an issue at all, it would more likely take the form of private warning to the US against use of OXCART over the USSR. But there are other possibilities which are included in the discussion below.

1. The Soviets know of the existence of a US aircraft such as the OXCART; we believe that they do not know the details of its capabilities. One virtually certain reaction to the flights would be for the Soviets to use them to gain more information about the vehicle.

2. The Soviets might be puzzled as to why we were using this vehicle at this time, for returns which would probably not seem to them worth the cost of revealing more of the aircraft's capabilities. They would wonder why we chose to introduce this new factor into the Cuban situation which is quiet, and in which

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they probably consider that we are getting all the intelligence we need from unpublicized and unmolested U-2 flights. We think their most likely interpretations would be that the flights represented either (a) a stage in the routine replacement of a U-2 capability which was obsolescent, or (b) final trials before use of the aircraft over North Vietnam, over China, or even over the USSR.

3. We think it unlikely that the Soviets (or Cubans) would attempt to shoot the OXCART down with an SA-2 missile. We see no reason why the OXCART should be attacked when the U-2 is not.*

4. The real question is whether the Soviets would decide to make an issue of the matter -- publicly or privately. They might do so out of concern that the US was preparing to use the vehicle over the USSR, and out of a desire to get US assurances -- public or private -- renouncing any such use. It is also possible that they might use it as an occasion for raising the whole question of overhead reconnaissance (including that by satellites); or more generally for showing a harder line towards the US with respect to Vietnam.

5. On the whole, we think it unlikely that the Soviets would want to heat up the international situation over this issue -- if only because it would involve embarrassment about past U-2

*We are advised that any such attempt against the OXCART would almost certainly be unsuccessful.

flights over Cuba, and uncertainties about how to deal with OXCART in the future. Hence we doubt that they would create a public furor, or reopen the whole question of overhead reconnaissance. There is about an even chance that they would make private representations to the US, warning against use of the vehicle over the USSR.

6. Whatever the desires of the US and Soviet governments, something about use of this vehicle over Cuba might become public, either by Cuban declaration or by leaks to the press. In such case the Soviets would surely declare their ability to deal with the aircraft over the USSR. If there were substantial publicity, the Soviets might feel constrained to make a greater issue of it; we think they would prefer not to do so.

7. If the vehicle came down in Cuba (which we are informed is extremely unlikely) and especially if the pilot were alive, there would certainly be a great deal of propaganda and publicity. The chances of Soviet actions along the lines mentioned above would substantially increase; we still do not think the Soviets would create an international crisis. If the aircraft came down at sea and was not recovered by Cubans, Communist reactions would probably be the same as if it had returned to its base.

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8. There is one other slight possibility worth canvassing. The Cubans may be sufficiently annoyed by U-2 reconnaissance, and sufficiently eager to do something about it, to seize upon use of the OXCART as evidence that the US itself had changed a static situation. They might then consider that it gave them license to use SA-2 missiles against U-2 aircraft subsequently overflying their country. We believe that they would not think the risk worth taking; it does not make much sense from their point of view; moreover they would almost certainly be restrained by the Soviets.

9. Chinese Communist and North Vietnamese reactions would be limited at most to propaganda if the affair became public. Both countries would doubtless expect the vehicle to be used over them, but the North Vietnamese at least expect direct US reconnaissance in any case. We do not believe that either country would take the event as evidence of US intentions to escalate war in the Far East, though both might issue propaganda to this effect.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

ABBOT SMITH
Acting Chairman

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